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The neoconservative roots of the war in Iraq

John Dumbrell

The 2003 invasion of Iraq appeared, certainly on the surface of things, to exemplify and realize several of the fundamental tenets of neoconservative thought in the US. The Bush Doctrine of preemption, the tendency toward unilateralism and working via “coalitions of the willing,” the willingness (even eagerness) to use and sustain American military power, the attendant moral certainty, the notion of using Iraqi regime change as the starting motor of a democratizing engine for the entire Middle East: locating such ideas and commitments in the columns of neoconservative-leaning journals, newspapers, and think tank reports is an easy task. The period between the terror attacks of September 11, 2001 and the onset of the Iraq war was, in Francis Fukuyama’s phrase, “the neoconservative moment.”¹ For Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, there had occurred a neoconservative hijacking of US foreign policy. “In the tumultuous days following 9/11,” wrote Halper and Clarke in 2004, “the neoconservatives were ready with a detailed, plausible blueprint for the nation’s response.”² Senator Joe Biden of Delaware, ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, declared in July 2003: “They [the neocons] seem to have captured the heart and mind of the President, and they’re controlling the foreign policy agenda.”³

This notion of post-9/11 neoconservative ascendancy is by no means unchallengeable. The fevered nature of international political discourse in the era of the Iraq invasion tended to militate against rational analysis. For many opponents of the invasion, the term “neocon” became little more than an insult, connoting extremism and conspiracy. The British writer Ian McEwan, whose 2005 novel *Saturday* was set on the day of the massive London anti-war march in February 2003, put the following words into the mouth of Daisy Perowne, a young protester against the policies of President George W. Bush: “You know very well, these extremists, the Neo-cons, have taken over America. Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz [*sic*]. Iraq was always their pet project.”⁴

The emotionalism exemplified in Daisy Perowne's outburst, reflecting the passions which affected even academic analysis of the Bush foreign policy, tended to ignore or conflate the complex and overlapping faction lines within the Bush administration. As will be made clear below, neo-conservatism is a diverse intellectual movement; name-calling and "othering" of the neocons achieves little. As David Brooks, former journalist on the *Weekly Standard*, wrote in 2004, giving your foes "a collective name" makes meager analytic sense: "You get to feed off their villainy and luxuriate in your contrasting virtue".⁵ The main purpose of this chapter is to provide a reasonably cool and rational account of the development of neoconservative views on US foreign policy, culminating in the decision to invade Iraq.

The neoconservative story: New York to Washington

American neoconservatism has been variously described as a movement, a persuasion, and a network. Its elite orientation, extreme intellectualism, and close-knit familialism have all attracted accusations of conspiracy, even of "unAmericanism." Populist New Righter Pat Buchanan declared in 1987 that "we are better off with these people as adversaries."⁶ The Jewishness of some leading neoconservatives is well known, as is the Trotskyist past of first generation neocons, notably Irving Kristol. Joshua Muravchik, himself a former leftist, actually holds that Kristol was the only "major neocon figure" who had a "significant dalliance with Trotskyism."⁷ Nevertheless, neoconservatism is frequently discussed almost as much in terms of its status as a deviant leftism as a feature of the American tradition of conservatism. The movement, if a movement it is, resembles a "clan" (as Anatol Lieven puts it) more than it does a "conspiracy." It has been made possible, to use Lieven's words once more, "by the American System's blurring of the lines among government, academia, the media and business."⁸ The movement's intellectual output has been prodigious, belying notions of secrecy and conspiratorial intent. It has attracted Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals, including prominent Roman Catholic thinkers and writers. The movement's ideas have not been Platonic constants, but rather have evolved and developed dialectically with the rhythms and cycles of history. Let us attempt a brief survey of the movement's historical development.

Most of the leading first generation neoconservatives, including Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Bell, attended the City College of New York in the 1930s. Indeed, it is possible to trace the origins of the movement to one section of the CCNY canteen, where the young intellectuals debated varieties of Marxism. Disillusionment even with anti-Stalinist

Marxism led the group towards the project of creating an authentically American political philosophy, rooted in patriotic moral certainty and respect for free markets. As Francis Fukuyama later recalled, leading neocons traveled rightwards at their own individual pace: "Irving Kristol moved the farthest, Irving Howe the least, and [Daniel] Bell, [Nathan] Glazer, [Seymour Martin] Lipset and [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan ended up somewhere in between."⁹ The new philosophy, initially located in the Democratic Party, was anti-communist and increasingly contemptuous of the social reforming ambitions of "high" American liberalism. In 2004, Fukuyama reminded his neoconservative associates that they had spent much of the latter part of the twentieth century warning against the kind of swift and ahistorical schemes of social transformation that were now being attempted in the Middle East: "If the United States cannot eliminate poverty or raise test scores in Washington DC, how does it expect to bring democracy to a part of the world that has stubbornly resisted it and is virulently anti-American to boot?"¹⁰

The intellectual lineage of neoconservatism snakes back to Plato. It certainly includes the work of Leo Strauss, University of Chicago philosopher and interpreter of canonical texts (including texts from the Islamic tradition). Milton Himmelfarb wrote that Strauss's work constituted "an invitation to join those privileged few who, having ascended from the (Platonic) cave, gaze upon the sun with unhooded eyes, while yet mindful of those others below, in the dark."¹¹ From Strauss and Straussianism, neoconservatism acquired the reputation for extreme elitism and for harboring somewhat ambivalent attitudes toward "those others below, in the dark." Strauss's own philosophical and literary exegesis emphasized the individual virtue of those who had managed to escape the darkness of the cave; it also focused on hidden meanings in canonical texts, especially those written under "tyrannical" regimes.¹²

By the 1960s and 1970s, young Straussian intellectuals became active in American academic, public and governmental life. If not exactly living in a Straussian "tyranny," they certainly felt themselves beleaguered by new, and profoundly uncongenial, strands within American liberalism: moral relativism, egalitarian anti-intellectualism and what were seen as the distasteful culture and practices of the anti-Vietnam war movement. To many self-consciously beleaguered neocons in the early 1970s, superpower détente was simply a euphemism for compromising with tyranny. The fact that it was being pursued by the "realist" Republican administration of Richard Nixon merely showed the distance which America's Grand Old Party needed to travel in order to achieve any kind of neo-conservative authenticity. At best, détente was national self-deception, playing into the hands of Moscow; at worst, it was part of the indulgent

self-hatred that had resulted from the failure of the US nerve in Vietnam. The neoconservative foreign policy hero of the 1970s was Democratic Senator and "defence hawk," Henry "Scoop" Jackson of Washington. Neocon intellectuals applauded Jackson's unblinking anti-Sovietism and excoriated President Jimmy Carter's efforts to substitute "human rights" for anti-communism as the integrative basis for US foreign relations.¹³

During the wilderness years—the Churchillian parallel is apt—the movement was sustained by magazine publication, and by family and personal connection. Domestic neoconservative themes were sounded in *The Public Interest*, international ones in *Commentary*. Also by the 1970s, the American Enterprise Institute, originally founded in 1943, was becoming the think tank of the right, with an increasingly neocon orientation. "Scoop" Jackson's Senate staff provided a temporary home for several important neocon politicians, including Elliott Abrams, Richard Perle and Frank Gaffney. On the executive side of government, Paul Wolfowitz—initially employed in Nixon's Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), but moving to the Pentagon in the Carter years—became a seminal figure, encouraging and sponsoring young hawkish defense intellectuals.

Wolfowitz, later to become Donald Rumsfeld's deputy in George W. Bush's Defense Department, was a former pupil of Leo Strauss and, more importantly, for his future development, of rightist nuclear strategist and academic, Albert Wohlstetter. Wohlstetter's lines of argument, especially regarding the war-fighting potential of accurate missiles, themselves became neoconservative weapons to be hurled at détente and at the "realism" of Henry Kissinger. From 1973, Wolfowitz worked under Fred Iklé at ACDA, an agency which emerged in the second Nixon administration as a force which questioned and indeed opposed the building of détente and arms control. In 1976, under President Gerald Ford, Wolfowitz took part in the "Team B" exercise which investigated Soviet capabilities and intentions. He subsequently acknowledged the power of the "Team B" experience in causing him to look beyond consensus assumptions. At the Pentagon under Jimmy Carter, Wolfowitz became increasingly preoccupied with the politics of Middle Eastern oil. The 1979 Limited Contingency Study included a section, written by Dennis Ross under direction by Wolfowitz, on "the emerging Iraqi threat."¹⁴

The neoconservative story: Reagan to George W. Bush

As head of the State Department policy planning staff in the early 1980s, Paul Wolfowitz analyzed American options for the post-détente era. At this time, his main priority was China: essentially questioning the

rationale of the Nixon/Kissinger opening. Wolfowitz's office, both in policy planning and after his 1982 promotion to the post of Assistant Secretary for East Asia and the Pacific, became a neocon outpost in a Reagan administration which tended to favour "pragmatic hawks" over intellectuals. Despite some traces of neocon enthusiasm in his policies and outlook—most clearly in Central America—President Reagan was not the ideological prisoner of the several hardline conservative intellectuals who comprised the anti-Carter Committee on the Present Danger in the late 1970s. Yet the neoconservative cause was nurtured in Reagan's Washington: by Wolfowitz and his associates, by Richard Perle and Fred Iklé at the Pentagon, by Elliott Abrams at State, and, most publicly of all, by Jeane Kirkpatrick, US Ambassador to the United Nations.

Kirkpatrick's appointment built on the tradition of extreme neoconservative skepticism about, and frustration with, the UN which had recently been demonstrated during Senator Moynihan's tenure as Ambassador to the UN under President Ford. Moynihan's UN memoir¹⁵—essentially an assault on the double standards, anti-Israeli and anti-American biases of the institution—had, by the early 1980s, become a classic recognition of how little could be achieved through indiscriminate international multilateralism. A former member of the Socialist Party of America and a Democrat until 1985, Kirkpatrick rapidly received Reagan's praise (as he put it) for removing from America's back the sign that said "Kick Me." Her major contribution to neoconservative thought was her 1979 *Commentary* article, "Dictatorships and Double Standards." The piece famously argued that non-communist autocracies at least had the potential to develop in a democratic direction; "totalitarian" communist states did not. The logic was clear: the US should look after its non-communist friends. Kirkpatrick's thinking pointed away from hasty, interventionist democracy-promotion. It represented strongly the realist strand in neoconservative thought, albeit a strand still rooted in moral certainty. Sentences from "Dictatorships and Double Standards" were quoted by commentators *in opposition* to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. "No idea holds greater sway in the mind of educated Americans than the belief that it is possible to democratize governments, anytime and anywhere, under any circumstances." Democracy, for Kirkpatrick, was an exceedingly slow-growing plant. She continued, writing nearly a quarter of a century before the post-invasion collapse of order in Iraq: "The speed with which armies collapse, bureaucracies abdicate, and social structures dissolve once the autocrat is removed frequently surprises American policymakers."¹⁶

Later neocon reverence for "Reaganism"—essentially for Reagan's values-oriented commitment to sustained American military primacy—was

based on more than a degree of selective memory. In this respect it mirrored neocon worship of Winston Churchill, which tended to neglect the British leader's role as a post-1945 advocate of superpower proto-détente.¹⁷ Reagan's "squeeze" strategy on the USSR, advocated by Richard Perle, was applied, at least in the non-military sphere, pragmatically and even half-heartedly. By the later 1980s, *Commentary* tended to represent a branch of American conservatism—implicitly or explicitly critical of Reagan—which felt that events were running ahead of American interests. The movement floundered as the Cold War expired.¹⁸

It fell to a new generation, led by William Kristol, son of Irving, and extending to controversialists such as Charles Krauthammer, to re-fashion neoconservatism for the new, Soviet-less era. The project began under Reagan; by the second term of President Clinton it had made extraordinary progress. The organizational practices of the "new" neocons echoed those of the founding generation. New journals, notably *The National Interest*—its publication in 1989 of Fukuyama's "end of history" ideas dragged an obscure magazine into the global sunshine—were generated. In 1995, the Rupert Murdoch-owned (and Rupert Murdoch-subsidized) *Weekly Standard* was launched as a somewhat downmarket and even, defying the Platonic elitism of neocon tradition, populist conduit for neoconservative ideas. By the later Clinton years, the "new" neoconservatism even had a postal address: 1150 Seventeenth Street, Washington DC—an office building which housed both the American Enterprise Institute and the *Weekly Standard*.¹⁹ From his fifth floor office at 1150 Seventeenth, William Kristol coordinated the activities of an array of rightist lobbying associations. Among Kristol's organizational alphabet soup, one organization stood out in connection with evolving neocon ideas regarding Iraq: PNAC, the Project for a New American Century.

PNAC issued its founding Statement of Principles in 1997, though a letter, urging President Clinton to address the threat posed by Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, was sent under PNAC's auspices in July 1996. At one level, the Project for a New American Century was part of the "new" neoconservative response to the end of the Cold War. Neoconservatism was now firmly a strand within the Republican party. Its adherents, in PNAC and well beyond, now argued the case for the "Reaganite" soul of the Grand Old Party. The immediate enemy was not so much Clinton and the Democrats, who actually were doing a reasonable job of keeping internationalism at the centre of US foreign policy, but rather "new populist" or neo-isolationist Republicans.²⁰ Robert Kagan and William Kristol promoted a "neo-Reaganite foreign policy", committed to unrelenting American hegemony and contemptuous of notions of "overstretch."²¹

On the narrower issue of Iraq, PNAC's ideas were forged during the presidency of George Herbert Walker Bush. They proceeded from responses to the 1991 Gulf war, especially in connection with America's failure then to remove Saddam Hussein from power. Bush senior no more followed a neocon foreign policy than had Reagan. For a variety of reasons, contemporary neocons find it difficult to criticise either president. Yet, post-Cold War neoconservatism was actually defined in the space between Reagan's "utopianism"—notably his extraordinary attempt at the 1986 Reykjavik Summit to bargain away nuclear weapons altogether—and G. H. W. Bush's "pragmatic realism". Bushite pragmatism was seen as much in Bush senior's resolve to "avoid dancing on the Berlin Wall," as in the allowing of Saddam to remain safe in Baghdad two years later. The pragmatic realism of the 1991 decision to cease action in Iraq was defended in the memoirs of Colin Powell, the elder Bush and Brent Scowcroft. The US had no United Nations mandate to assault Baghdad; Muslim members of the coalition would oppose the move; removing Iraq's head would merely stimulate chaos, propelling Washington into an unpopular and unsustainable program of Vietnam-style nationbuilding. Powell was even prepared to acknowledge that Saddam had his limited virtues, as a secular strongman with whom Washington had done business in the past.²² From a neocon perspective (though not all neoconservatives actually took this view), Colin Powell's line amounted to betrayal. In 1992, Joshua Muravchik attacked Bush's "foreign policy realism" in the pages of *New Republic*, the old leftwing journal which was now increasingly becoming a neoconservative platform. President G. H. W. Bush saw Saddam in Baghdad as capable of balancing Iran: "But," wrote Muravchik, "since both of these regimes remain bloodily repressive, internationally mischievous, and implacably hostile to America, just what is realistic about it?" Muravchik urged anyone who agreed with him to vote for Clinton in 1992. In 1996, Muravchik criticised the "balancing game," noting that "today the strongest criticism of Bush's action is not that he was too fast to resort to war but rather that he was too fast to end it."²³

Neoconservatives publicly applauded the 1991 Gulf War as an effort to terminate "Vietnam syndrome" inhibitions on the use of American military power, and as a warning to the world. Muravchik declared in 1996: "The degree to which our decisive defeat of Iraq may have deterred others cannot be known."²⁴ No doubt the deterrent effect would have been stronger had Saddam been ousted successfully. The neoconservative role *within* the Bush administration, however, was rather more equivocal.

During the Bush (senior) presidential years, Paul Wolfowitz worked under Defense Secretary Richard Cheney as chief policy undersecretary.

Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, Wolfowitz and Lewis "Scooter" Libby, his contingency planning assistant, drew up plans directly to invade Iraq. The initiative emanated from Henry Rowen, from the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, who was then employed as another assistant to Wolfowitz. Under Cheney's overall direction, the plan, Operation Scorpion, was developed with no direct connection to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and certainly with no interagency input. The plan, which was eventually rejected by Colin Powell as chair of the Joint Chiefs, provided for the establishment of a US base in the western desert, within a hundred miles of Baghdad. The plan provided for the American forces to have the ability to destroy Scud missiles aimed at Israel. Despite the audacity of Operation Scorpion, Wolfowitz did not apparently oppose Powell's decision to leave Saddam in power in 1991; nor, indeed did Richard Cheney. In an essay on the future of Iraq published in 1997, Wolfowitz subscribed to the Bush-Scowcroft-Powell view on the Saddam ouster. Drawing a parallel with General Douglas MacArthur's "reckless" push to the Yalu river during the Korean war, Wolfowitz at that time acknowledged the possibility of the US being dragged into a "more or less permanent occupation of a country that could not govern itself, but where the rule of a foreign occupier would be increasingly resented".²⁵ In 1991, Wolfowitz and Libby were certainly in favour of inflicting the maximum *damage* on Saddam's forces. Along with Dennis Ross from the State Department, they also urged intervention, immediately following the 1991 ceasefire, on behalf of Shiite and Kurdish rebel forces who were being attacked by Saddam's helicopter gunships. In 1993, Wolfowitz wrote that the fate of the Shiites and Kurds "in no small part reflected a miscalculation by some of our military commanders that a rapid disengagement was essential to preserve the luster of victory, and to avoid getting stuck with postwar objectives that would prevent us from ever disengaging."²⁶

The most celebrated emanation from Bush's office during this period was a more oblique reaction to the Gulf victory of 1991: the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance. This statement of post-Cold War purpose was designed to serve as a benchmark for US defense budgeting in the foreseeable future. The 1992 Guidance which was leaked to the press in April of that year was a draft, authored primarily by Zalmay Khalilzad (subsequently George W. Bush's post-invasion ambassador in Iraq and Afghanistan). Khalilzad, an Afghan-American with strong neocon links, portrayed future US policy as building on the opportunities created by the "two victories" in the Cold War and in the Gulf. America would not assume "responsibility for righting every wrong" in the world; it would "retain the pre-eminent responsibility for addressing selectively those

wrongs which threaten not only our interests, but those of our allies and friends, or which could seriously unsettle international relations." Khalilzad listed the types of US interest which might be involved: "access to vital raw materials, primarily Persian Gulf oil; proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles; threats to US citizens from terrorism or regional or local conflict; and threats to US society from narcotics trafficking." The document contained important implications for the future of the US commitment to multilateralism in the post-Gulf War era: "we should expect future coalitions to be *ad hoc* assemblies often not lasting beyond the crisis being confronted."²⁷

The most controversial aspect of the leaked Guidance related to its "no rivals" section: a policy recommendation designed to deflect and "integrate" German and Japanese global ambitions. A revised version of the Guidance, written primarily by Lewis Libby, was accepted by Cheney. Libby's version was less abrasive: not only regarding Germany and Japan, but also in its willingness to concede the virtues of stable multilateralism. However, its general thrust—an integrated, doctrinally realist, global American hegemonism, rooted in the perpetual maintenance of US military primacy—was retained.

Whereas Bill Clinton became the object of extraordinary personal hatred for many Republican conservatives in the 1990s, neocons like Wolfowitz appreciated the force of his (and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's) second term commitment to America as the world's "indispensable nation." The second Clinton administration even began to remilitarize, also yielding to Republican pressure to revive National Missile Defense. The 1999 action in Kosovo demonstrated the Democratic administration's willingness to take military action without UN sanction. Under Clinton, the US also bombed Iraq, with the UK as its only active ally, and was arguably also following a policy which embraced the goal of "regime change."²⁸ Despite all this, however, for most neocons, Clinton was too indecisive and too committed to working with the appeasing Europeans, not to mention being hopelessly on the "wrong" side in the culture wars.²⁹ Joshua Muravchik renounced his support for Clinton in 1993, citing the Balkans as his major complaint. In 1996, Muravchik was still bemoaning the failure to unseat Saddam in 1991: "The United States would have ousted Saddam, pulled together an interim governing coalition of Iraqi dissidents, supervised an open election, and still withdrawn within a year." Clinton had compounded Bush's errors.³⁰ In 1998, Wolfowitz attacked Clinton's Iraqi goals. The US should (according to Wolfowitz) begin real democracy-promotion and regime change, indicating its "willingness to recognise a provisional government of free Iraq" (essentially the Iraqi National Congress led by Ahmad Chalabi).³¹

A friend of Richard Perle since the 1980s, Ahmad Chalabi was to become increasingly central to the neocon strategy for Iraq. Chalabi opposed “solving” the problem of Iraq either through containing Saddam—the frequently stated Clinton idea of keeping the Iraqi dictator “in his box”—or by engineering some kind of internal putsch. Removing the dictator without dismantling his regime would merely subject the Iraqi nation to more agony, while doing nothing for the cause of Middle Eastern peace and security.³² By 1997, Wolfowitz, now returned to academic life, was also advocating invasion. On 1 December 1997, the *Weekly Standard* published a piece by Wolfowitz and Khalilzad. Explaining their thinking on Saddam Hussein, it was entitled “Overthrow Him.” On November 18, 1997, Wolfowitz wrote an article for the *Wall Street Journal* on “Rebuilding the anti-Saddam Coalition.” Reflecting the view of the European alliance which derived from neocon interpretations of recent events in the Balkans, he argued that the allies could be “bounced” into supporting an invasion: “A willingness to act unilaterally can be the most effective way of securing effective collective action.” His thoughts at this stage seemed to be running in the direction of America forcibly establishing a “liberated zone” in Southern Iraq, forming a platform from which to mount a war of liberation for the whole country.

The organizational expression of this new thinking on Iraq was William Kristol’s Project for a New American Century. PNAC became part of the rightist assault on Clinton. It represented a conscious effort to align intellectual neoconservatism with more traditional Republican defence hawks: this new alignment, of course, was to prove crucial to the development of the Iraq invasion decisions of 2002–3. Donald Rumsfeld was a signatory to the 1996 letter to Clinton, urging “military action” in Iraq, in order to eliminate the “possibility that Iraq will be able to use or threaten to use weapons of mass destruction.” Associated with PNAC’s formal founding in 1997 were figures such as Wolfowitz, Libby, Kirkpatrick, Henry Rowen and Richard Perle. Francis Fukuyama was involved and, representing the older neocon generation, so was Norman Podhoretz. Also prepared to sign the founding PNAC document, however, were Rumsfeld, Dan Quayle, Jeb Bush and Richard Cheney. In January 1998, PNAC sent an open letter to the White House in advance of Clinton’s State of the Union address. The letter argued that “we can no longer depend on our partners in the Gulf War coalition to continue to uphold the sanctions or to punish Saddam when he blocks or evades UN inspections.” In the “near term,” the US must demonstrate “a willingness to undertake military action.” Clinton must embark on a clear strategy aimed “at the removal of Saddam Hussein from power.”³³

Neocon signatories included Bill Kristol, Wolfowitz, Khalilzad, Francis Fukuyama, John Bolton, Robert Kagan, and Richard Perle. Defense hawks were represented by Rumsfeld, though Cheney's signature was missing. Other signatories who were to serve in the George W. Bush administration included Richard Armitage, Paula Dobriansky, Peter Rodman, and Robert Zoellick.

By the end of the Clinton years, neoconservatism had been regenerated, primarily by Bill Kristol, as a force pressurizing US foreign policy. The revived movement spread its net widely; in 1999, PNAC urged Clinton to end his policy of "strategic ambiguity" for Taiwan. Yet, the movement had a very clear focus: regime change in Iraq. Important links and continuities had been established with more orthodox, defense-oriented conservatives. Though utterly opposed to the insular, occasionally anti-Jewish forces in the Grand Old Party represented by Pat Buchanan, the "new" neoconservatism was not entirely out of tune with the more general rightwing upsurge of the 1990s.

Neocons in the new century

The "new" neoconservatism was not merely a fan club for George W. Bush. Bill Kristol actually supported John McCain in the 2000 Republican primaries. Nevertheless various PNAC signatories—Armitage, Rumsfeld, Bolton, Abrams, Feith, Wolfowitz and Khalilzad were the most prominent—gained important positions in the Bush Pentagon, State Department or National Security Council staff. Cheney became Vice President, bringing Lewis Libby into his office. Neither Rumsfeld nor Cheney, however, were intellectual neocons on the Wolfowitz or Khalilzad model. Generally, the administration neocons were second-level (as Richard Neustadt later argued) "junior ministers," much as they had been in the Reagan or Bush senior administrations.³⁴ Richard Armitage, though a PNAC signatory, was a strong supporter of Colin Powell, whose deputy he became. The 2001 Bush appointments signalled a more militarized foreign policy; they certainly did not signal a neocon takeover. The foreign policy of the first eight months of the administration were characterized by the rather narrow interests-based realism defended by National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice during the election campaign.³⁵ Bush's willingness to reject treaties which seemed to impinge on US freedom of action pleased neocon commentators. The new foreign policy, however, also had, as was seen during the China spy plane crisis of April 2001, more than a hint of old-fashioned pragmatism. What changed this world—what changed the world—of course, was 9/11, an event which effectively solidified that alliance between neocon

and “defense hawk” thinking which had been prefigured in PNAC. Before examining the course of events after 9/11, let us take stock of the neoconservative movement as it contemplated the new century.

Though, thanks largely to Bill Kristol, more organizationally coherent than the older movement, the “new” neoconservatism was far from intellectually united. In particular, it exhibited two sets of competing tensions: between optimism and pessimism, and between realism and moralistic idealism.

At one level, and certainly regarding their recommendations (under Clinton and under George W. Bush) for Iraq, the neocons were optimistic to the point of naivety. Recall Muravchik’s comments, quoted above, about the possibility of achieving a democratic transition and removing US military forces from Iraq within a year. Wolfowitz in the 1990s clearly saw the problems faced by an occupying army which was also trying to build democracy. Yet, he tended to speak in terms of “trying to remove the shackles on democracy” in Iraq, as if some nascent democratic system were ready to sprout wings once Saddam was removed. Rather than the arrogance of “imposing” values, real arrogance, according to Wolfowitz, was to assume that democracy was an “American” rather than a universal good.³⁶ Optimistic democracy-promotion in neocon thought tends to find its own negation in the kind of cautious realism expressed in Kirkpatrick’s “Dictatorships and Double Standards” article. It continually runs up against an underlying scepticism about the ability of the Platonic cave-dwellers actually to turn their faces to the light.

The realism/idealism tension in neocon thought is clear and widely recognized. For Chalmers Johnson, the movement was a combination of “the military imperialism of Theodore Roosevelt and the idealistic imperialism of Woodrow Wilson.”³⁷ For Anatol Lieven, neoconservatism rests on the “selective use of ‘democratization’ with strategies based on ruthless ‘Realism’.”³⁸ Much early twenty-first-century ink has been spilled in the effort to capture the realism/idealism balance within neoconservatism. Charles Krauthammer, for example, distinguishes between “democratic realists,” pro-democracy interventionists with a strong commitment to traditionally conceived national interests, and “democratic globalists,” less cautious interventionists including moralistic liberals like Tony Blair as well as more idealist-oriented neocons.³⁹ Some commentators actually see neoconservatism as a branch of realism. It is certainly the case that some neocon policy formulations—one thinks of the 1992 Defense Guidance or even some of the essays in Kagan and Kristol’s collection, *Present Dangers*⁴⁰—were couched overwhelmingly in realist terms. For Gerard Alexander, neocons are simply “balance-of-threat realists.”⁴¹ Barely a month after 9/11, Richard Perle looked

forward to a world transformed by regime change in both Afghanistan and Iraq: "Because having destroyed the Taliban, having destroyed Saddam's regime, the message to the others is, 'You're next'. Two words. Very efficient dipolomacy."⁴² It would be hard to imagine a more clear expression of "balance-of-threat realism." Yet, Perle's 2004 statement of neoconservative aspiration (co-written with David Frum) went under the moralistic title, *An End to Evil*.⁴³ Foreign policy neoconservatism arguably came of age in its critique of the classical realism of Henry Kissinger. Post-Cold War neoconservatism also imbibed a version of liberal, neoKantian "democratic peace" theory: the view that international peace derives from international democratization.⁴⁴ In general, neoconservatism tends to accept the Jeffersonian view that American values and interests are one. Depending on the skill of individual thinkers, the realism/idealism puzzle is either a source of confusion or an occasion of transcendent Hegelian synthesis. In the case of the Iraq invasion, it was decidedly the former.

Early twenty-first-century foreign policy neoconservatism both reflected and encouraged the post-Cold War triumphalism which had been postponed during the uncertain, and relatively economically troubled years of the elder Bush and early Clinton. The end of the Cold War and the economic boom of the 1990s eventually ushered in a new age of American hegemony: the "unipolar moment" which US leaders must not squander. Around the turn of the century everything seemed to be going America's way. Not only had the Cold War ended in America's favor; the Japanese economy was apparently in deep trouble. The US was the only remaining superpower, with massive military, economic (especially now that the Reagan deficit had been eliminated), and "soft power" resources. John Bolton—dubbed by Chris Patten "the Pavarotti of the neo-conservatives"⁴⁵—lost no opportunity in his role as US Ambassador to the UN to extol the view that America, the ultimate guarantor of the global future, should not succumb to the messy compromise that was collective decisionmaking. Turn of the century neoconservatism also famously toyed with the notion of benevolent empire. According to Kristol and Kagan in 2000, "it is precisely because American foreign policy is infused with an unusually high degree of morality that other nations find they have less to fear from its otherwise daunting power".⁴⁶

George W. Bush: to Baghdad

Neoconservatives outside the administration tended to see 9/11 as a vindication of their pre-existing drive towards primacy, extended forward defence, unilateralism and globalism. At one level, the 9/11 terrorists

had, in effect, made the case for American empire. Max Boot penned a piece in the *Weekly Standard* on October 15, 2001 entitled "The Case for American Empire." Robert Kaplan looked to earlier empires, including the British, for "helpful hints about how to run American foreign policy."⁴⁷ As the Bush administration made its post-9/11 decisions, it is certainly the case that talk of empire was in the air, and that the talk was led by neoconservative commentators and intellectuals. Charles Krauthammer wrote on September 21, 2001 that this was no time "for agonized relativism."⁴⁸ PNAC addressed yet another letter to the White House, urging the establishment of a "safe zone" in Iraq for opponents of Saddam. A "determined effort" must be made to remove Saddam: "Failure to undertake such an effort will constitute an early and perhaps decisive surrender in the war on international terrorism."⁴⁹

Our knowledge of what transpired within the Bush administration in the period between 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq leans heavily on leaks, anonymous interviews and journalistic re-creations. Most accounts portray Paul Wolfowitz as pressing strongly and successfully for action in Iraq. This was scarcely surprising, given his (and Rumsfeld's) attitude towards Iraq *before* 9/11. The possibility of an attack on Iraq seems to have been discussed at a Bush National Security Council meeting as early as January 30, 2001. Iraq policy in this early period drifted, with different agencies going their separate ways.⁵⁰ Richard Clarke recalled Wolfowitz arguing at a deputies' meeting at the White House in April 2001 that action against Iraq would be a reasonable response to the al Qaeda threat. Clarke concluded that Wolfowitz still subscribed to the erroneous view that Iraq was behind the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center.⁵¹

Immediately after 9/11, according to Bob Woodward, at White House meetings on September 15, 2001, Wolfowitz argued that Iraq was "doable." Saddam's was "a brittle, oppressive regime that might break easily."⁵² At this stage, Bush seems to have been skeptical, especially about being seen to use 9/11 as an excuse to settle old scores, including the 1993 Iraqi attempt to assassinate his father. The possibility of invading Iraq, however, even before attacking Afghanistan, was canvassed in this period, primarily by Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and Feith. Greg Newbold, operations officer for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, reported Douglas Feith as asking in the immediate aftermath of 9/11: "Why are you working on Afghanistan? You ought to be working on Iraq."⁵³ Following the terror attacks, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz presided over the establishment of a special Pentagon intelligence unit, headed by Feith, to find evidence against Baghdad: either regarding links to al Qaeda or relating to Saddam's development of weapons of mass destruction. The

ensuing politicization of intelligence, generally undertaken against the advice and working assumptions of the Central Intelligence Agency, became a vital part of the developing momentum for war. Formal, detailed planning for an attack on Iraq appears to have begun at the Pentagon in November 2001.⁵⁴ From then on it is difficult to disagree with Michael Clarke that US policy on Iraq was effectively “on tram-lines.”⁵⁵ The swift advances in Afghanistan led to enhanced confidence about the possibilities in Iraq. In June 2002, Bush announced the doctrine of pre-emption at West Point. The neocon attitude in the pre-invasion period was generally one of incautious optimism. Outside the administration, Kenneth Adelman, former ACDA head and sometime assistant to Rumsfeld, wrote in March 2002: “I believe demolishing Hussein’s military power and liberating Iraq would be a cakewalk.”⁵⁶

As the conflict soured, leading neocons peeled off from the administration. Though clearly implicated in the failure to comprehend the difficulty of post-invasion Iraq, Paul Wolfowitz seems quickly to have come to the view that Rumsfeld was dodging the issue of post-invasion security. Though he originally forecast victory within seven days, he also foresaw the possibility of a prolonged insurgency by Baathists.⁵⁷ The neocons in and outside the administration to some degree deserved the contumely heaped upon them during the post-invasion conflict. Their evaluation of Chalabi was naive at best; the notion that the browbeaten Shia population of Southern Iraq would flock to the cause of returning exiles was absurd. Yet the entire administration was to blame, not just the neocons. Jay Garner’s Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance was a risible operation, while Paul Bremer’s lumbering Coalition Provisional Authority committed bungle after bungle.⁵⁸ Francis Fukuyama wrote that the Bush Doctrine was “now in shambles.”⁵⁹ Some neoconservatives simply blamed the ungrateful recipients of the liberation; Krauthammer intoned that “we have given the Iraqis a republic and they do not appear able to keep it.”⁶⁰ For David Frum, the agony of Iraq was a victory for the pessimistic tendency within neoconservatism: “Paul Wolfowitz has lost. Sam Huntington has won.”⁶¹

Conclusion

That neoconservatives in the administration, led by Wolfowitz, had an important role in moving Washington toward the invasion is not seriously in doubt. It is also reasonable to argue that neocon writing outside the administration was a significant factor in constructing the intellectual climate—broadly confident, unilateralist and wedded to regime change in Iraq—which nurtured the decision to invade. Was George W. Bush

essentially following a neocon foreign policy? Max Boot addressed this question in early 2004 from a neocon perspective. He concluded that Bush's policies toward China, North Korea, Iran and even toward Israel-Palestine relations were certainly not neoconservative ones. However, the National Security Strategy document issued in September 2002, the document which provided the intellectual basis for invading Iraq "was a quintessentially neoconservative document." Its doctrines—US military primacy, democracy promotion, pre-emptive action to head off threat—were neocon doctrines.⁶² All this, of course, does not mean that the influence of neoconservatism over the decision to invade Iraq has not been overstated. Various objections to viewing the decision to invade Iraq as a "neoconservative" one may be mounted.

The postulation of neoconservative ideas as a proximate source of policy—the decision to invade Iraq—raises profound philosophical questions which it is my intention to evade. International relations is studied and understood at many levels. The dominant paradigm is still a realist one, though most commentators would allow explanatory room, if not to unmediated ideas, at least to different *perceptions* of interest and to domestic popular and elite movements (such as American neoconservatism). More relevant to present discussion is the matter of nomenclature. So far in this chapter, I have used the term, "neoconservative", to refer primarily to the group of intellectuals, writers and academics—some of whom, like Wolfowitz, doubled as policymakers—who might reasonably trace their intellectual line back to figures such as Irving Kristol and Nathan Glazer, even arguably to Leo Strauss. Though spanning the generations, they were generally close friends and associates, though never a "conspiracy," with strong connections to publications such as *Commentary* and the *Weekly Standard*. Their thought, at least as far as foreign policy is concerned, was a mixture of anti-communism, democratic optimism, threats-based realism and, perhaps above all, a commitment to American exceptionalism. They tended to favor unilateral action, to be very skeptical of the worth of the United Nations, in favor of expansive use of US military power, committed generally to the interchangeability of American values and interests, even prepared at least to toy with the notion of openly promoting some form of American imperialism. Having fought something of a rearguard action against the fall in national confidence following the Vietnam war, they were buoyed up by the circumstances of the ending of the Cold War and by the upsurge in national confidence which attended the undisputed American hegemonism of the 1990s. Though generally taking a "conservative" line on domestic and defense issues, they were to some degree influenced by "liberal" notions, notably regarding free trade and post-Cold War

democratic peace theory. 9/11, along with the 2002 successes in Afghanistan, constituted a step-change in the development of their agenda for Iraq.

The problem for the current analysis is that, according to the preceding definition, only a relatively few members of the George W. Bush administration fit the description. Most were practical, not intellectual, conservatives. When Richard Cheney was asked to respond to criticism from the *Weekly Standard*, he replied: "They have to sell magazines. We have to govern."⁶³ Various terms have been coined to describe the top people in the Bush foreign policy hierarchy: "traditional realists," "conservative nationalists," "offensive realists" (Cheney and Rumsfeld, possibly Condoleezza Rice), "defensive realists" (Powell), and so on. Stanley Renshon argues that Bush himself—a figure often strangely omitted from discussion of the policies developed in his own administration—is best seen as an "American nationalist." In 1999, Bush declared that "in defense of our nation, a president must be a clear-eyed realist." Unless the American leader "sets his own priorities, his priorities will be set by others."⁶⁴ What seems to have happened following 9/11 is that there occurred a convergence between neoconservative positions on Iraq in particular, and on the kinds of priorities and policies detailed in the 2002 National Security Strategy in general, and the rather narrower, nationalist-conservative-realist positions of Cheney, Rumsfeld and Bush himself. This coalescence had already occurred to some degree in the 1990s—witness the range of signatures appended to the various PNAC letters—and had produced the phenomenon of the "Vulcan," a term used by James Mann to describe figures across the Republican board from Condoleezza Rice to Richard Armitage to Paul Wolfowitz.⁶⁵ The balance here is a fine one. Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld were not suddenly "converted" to neoconservatism in 2001. If they were, the limits of that conversion soon became apparent, not least in terms of policy towards East Asia. Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable, given the history and extent of neocon lobbying in this connection, to describe the Iraq invasion, like the 2002 National Security Strategy as "neoconservative" in form and intent.

The final word of the preceding paragraph, of course, raises yet more problems. What *was* the intent behind the invasion? From a neocon perspective, it was the democratic transformation of the Middle East region, protecting American geopolitical interests and advancing American values. It was a move designed to shape the political context in a way which would deter enemies, provide for a dependable flow of oil, and also promote—at least in the long term—the security of Israel. It would be good for America and for the Middle East. In the nature of things, different actors view actions in different ways. The balance of motive varied

across the administration. Decisional outputs, as a library of foreign policy texts argue, are mediated by bureaucratic politics. There is never an “essential” motive which finds its way from policy initiator—even if it is possible to identify such an initiator, and even in the unlikely circumstances that the initiator had a relatively simple motive—to policy. It is also clearly the case that the public defense of the invasion tended to focus primarily on the threat from weapons of mass destruction. Though he was speaking about the “monumental struggle between good and evil” soon after 9/11, President Bush tended to emphasize democracy promotion *per se*, notably in his 2005 State of the Union address, when it proved impossible to locate evidence of WMD in Iraq.⁶⁶ Various commentators have argued for a “forward defense” or “conservative nationalist” interpretation of the invasion.⁶⁷ Yet the invasion was intended, however unwisely or ill-advisedly, to convert a fascistic dictatorship into a democracy. Given their elitism and small numbers, neocons were unlikely ever to dominate even a fairly rightwing Republican administration. If their policy preferences were to be adopted, they would have to advance their ideas to sympathetic “American” or “conservative nationalists”. That is exactly what they did.

Notes

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- 4 Ian McEwan, *Saturday*, London, Cape, 2005, 190–1.
- 5 David Brooks, “The Neocon Cabal and other Fantasies,” in Irwin Stelzer, ed., *Neoconservatism*, London, Atlantic Books, 2004, 39–42, 42.
- 6 Alan Crawford, *Thunder on the Right*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1980, 173.
- 7 Joshua Muravchik, “The Neoconservative Cabal,” in Stelzer, ed., *Neoconservatism*, 241–58, 247.
- 8 Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism*, London, HarperCollins, 2004, 152.
- 9 Francis Fukuyama, *After the Neocons: America at the Crossroads*, London, Profile, 2007, 16–17.
- 10 Fukuyama, “The Neoconservative Moment,” 60.
- 11 Cited in John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Why America is Different*, London, Penguin, 2005, 75. See also Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2004.

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- 14 James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet*, London, Penguin, 2004, 75–6, 81.
- 15 Daniel P. Moynihan, *A Dangerous Place*, New York, Secker & Warburg, 1975.
- 16 Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorship and Double Standards," *Commentary*, 68, 1979, 28–51, 41.
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- 19 See Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 153–5.
- 20 See John Dumbrell, "Varieties of Post-Cold War American Isolationism," *Government and Opposition*, 34:1, 1999, 24–43.
- 21 William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "Towards a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, 75:4, 1996, 18–32.
- 22 George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, New York, Knopf, 1998, 488; Colin Powell, *A Soldier's Way: An Autobiography*, London, Hutchinson, 1995, 271.
- 23 Joshua Muravchik, *The Imperative of American Leadership: A Challenge to Neo-isolationism*, Washington DC, American Enterprise Institute, 1996, 31, 155.
- 24 Muravchik, *The Imperative of American Leadership*, 156.
- 25 See Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans*, 187–8, Henry S. Rowen, "Inchon in the Desert," *The National Interest*, 40, 1995, 34–9.
- 26 Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, London, Allen Lane, 2006, 7.
- 27 Barton Gellman, "Keeping the US First," *Washington Post*, 11 March 1992.
- 28 See Scott Ritter, *Iraq Confidential: The Untold Story of America's Intelligence Conspiracy*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2005, 268–70.
- 29 See Mark Gerson, *The Neoconservative Vision: From the Cold War to the Culture Wars*, Lanham, Madison Books, 1997.
- 30 Muravchik, *The Imperative of American Leadership*, 182–3.
- 31 Halper and Clarke, *America Alone*, 101–2.
- 32 Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans*, 334.
- 33 "An Open Letter to President Clinton," in Micah L. Sifry and Christopher Cerf, eds., *The Iraq War Reader*, New York, Touchstone, 2003, 199–201.
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- 38 Lieven, *America Right or Wrong*, 75.
- 39 Charles Krauthammer, "In Defense of Democratic Realism," *The National Interest*, 77, 2004, 15–25.
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- 50 See Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2004, 70.
- 51 Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror*, London, Free Press, 2004, 231–2.
- 52 Bob Woodward, *Bush at War*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2002, 83; see also Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2004.
- 53 Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iran*, London, Atlantic Books, 2007, 17.
- 54 Ricks, *Fiasco*, 32.
- 55 Michael Clarke, "The Diplomacy that led to the War in Iraq," in Paul Cornish, ed., *The Conflict in Iraq*, 2003, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2004, 274–87, 283.
- 56 Ricks, *Fiasco*, 36.
- 57 Bob Woodward, *Bush at War, Part III: State of Denial*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2006, 309.

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- 60 *The Economist*, March 24, 2007, 27.
- 61 *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2007, "Who Wins in Iraq," 44. Huntington was a central figure in the 1970s "excess of democracy" debate, as well as in the later "clash of civilizations" debate. See Samuel P. Huntington, "The United States," in Michael J. Crozier, S. P. Huntington and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy*, New York, New York University Press, 1975, 105–201; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996.
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- 63 Adam Wolfson, "Conservatism and Neoconservatism," in Stelzer, ed., *Neoconservatism*, 213–33, 226.
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- 65 Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans*, xv.
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- 67 See Steven Hurst, "Myths of Neoconservatism: George W. Bush's 'Neoconservative' Foreign Policy Revisited," *International Politics*, 42:1, 2005, 75–96.